

Two Poets of the Peasantry

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was really, I think, not so much, incapable of
relevance, as
reckless about it; his poem, fairly lucid at first,
became for
him, as for Goethe the second part of *Faust*,
a sort of
treasured playbox into which he could not
resist cram-
ming every new idea as it occurred to him.
He could not
bear to lose a single crumb of his
conceptions. He is not
the first writer who has spoilt his work with
second
thoughts. Did not someone say of Sainte-
Beuve's *Lundis*
'il n'a pas le temps de les gater'? Those
who contrast
their liveliness with the gluey pages of
Sainte-Beuve's
inappropriately named novel, *Volupte*, can
well believe it.
Piers Plowman may seem at times like the
work of Juliet's
Nurse turned religious in her old age; but
the work of
four different men it does not seem to me to
be, in spite
of the efforts of 'ye lovelye ladyes with youre
longe
fynGRES', researching in women's colleges, to
tear it finally
asunder. Too vividly there peers between the
lines,
throughout, the same lank, pale, tormented
countenance,
with the humourlessness of the struggling
self-made man,
the bookish severity of the born priest, the
pathos and
bitterness of another Jude the Obscure.

Obscure his destiny has since remained.
Four years
after the second version of 1377 *Piers*
Plowman rose in
rebellion.⁸ The Peasants' Revolt of 1381 must
have horri-
fied Langland, who wanted, not social

revolution, but

discovering that the number of parishes was
really only 9,000.
(G. M. Trevelyan, *Eng. in the Age of Wf cliffs*, p. 6.)

⁸It is curious what a wave of proletarian revolt
there seems to
have been through Western Europe at this rime—
alike in England,
France, and Flanders. The^ upper classes were
seriously frightened;
'on peut bien croire et imagined, says Froissart, *que
toute gentillesse
ct noblesse cut (x& morte et perdue en France et
autant bien ens is
autre pays', (ii, 137*)